THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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No. 48

THE GREAT GAME

Britain keeps the Russian bear from India

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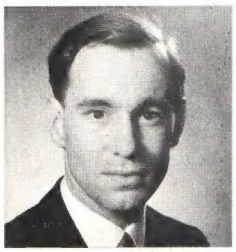

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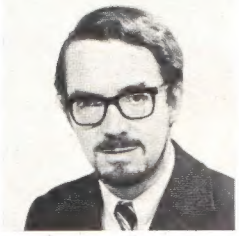

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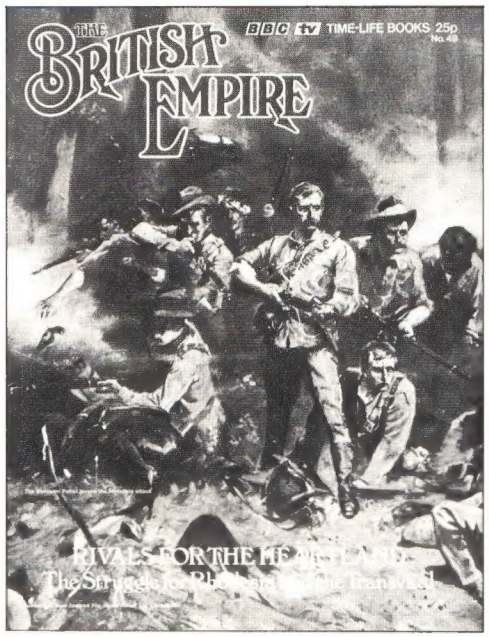

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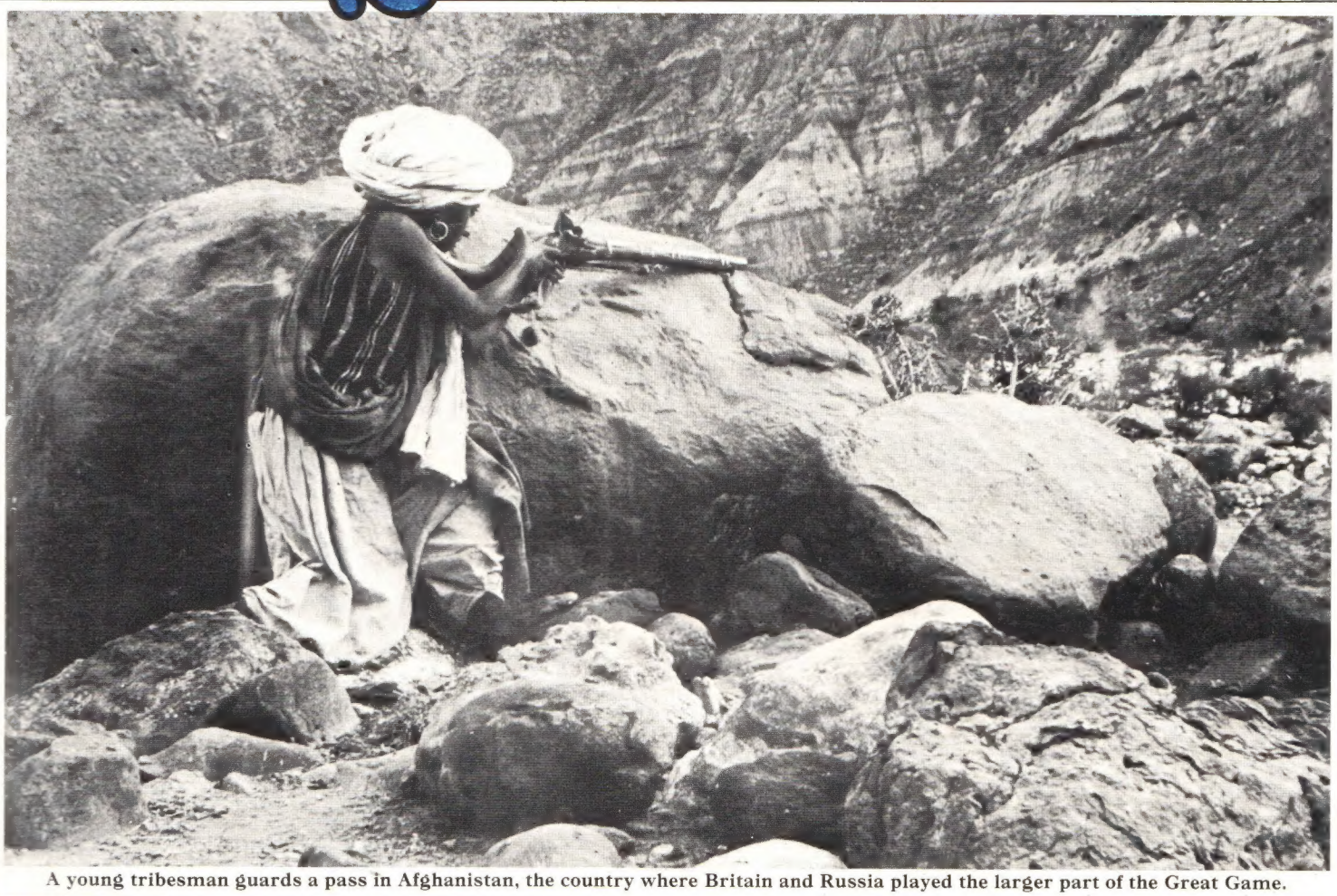
Cover: In a caricature attacking the Liberal policy towards Russian ambitions in Asia, the Russian bear calls the tune while Gladstone, shackled by his hope of an amicable "arrangement," keeps in time.

THE GREAT GAME



A young tribesman guards a pass in Afghanistan, the country where Britain and Russia played the larger part of the Great Game.

In the second half of the 19th Century, it seemed as though the Russian bear and the British lion were destined to meet head-on. For 100 years Russia had been expanding east and south at a rate, it has been calculated, of 55 square miles a day. The process seemed inexorable, but Britain was determined to stop it before India was threatened. The rivalry between the two, whimsically entitled "The Great Game" in the British Press, ranged from Europe to the Far East. On the borders of India – which Russia never really intended to invade – the "Game" led Britain into military adventure in both Afghanistan and Tibet – involvement that was largely unnecessary and occasionally disastrous.

by David Dilks and Roy Bridge

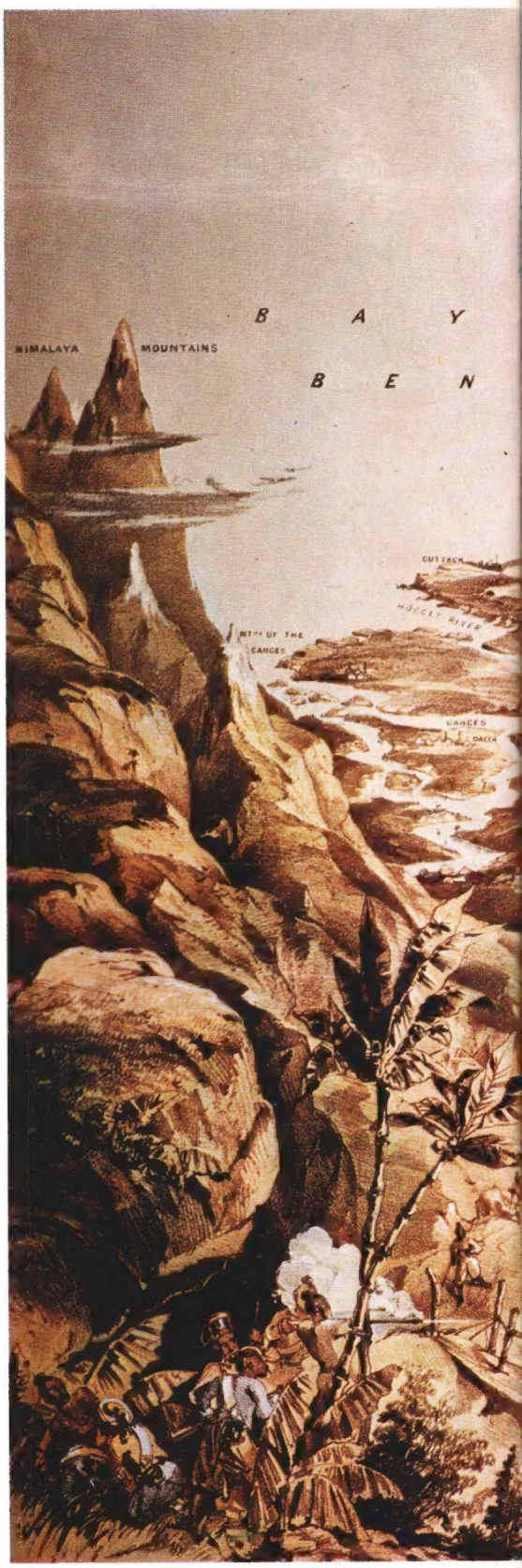
For over 100 years, from the early 18th to the mid-19th Centuries, Russia posed a steadily increasing challenge to British India. Peter the Great is supposed to have said in 1725 that Russia should move towards India; in 1791, the Empress Catherine was considering an invasion; and in 1800 Tsar Paul and Napoleon actually planned a joint expedition to relieve the supposedly groaning population of India from the British yoke. Napoleon rather prematurely sent out a ship laden with furniture for his future residence in India; but it was captured by the British and its cargo afterwards used by the Governors-General at Calcutta.

Nevertheless, as the 19th Century drew on, the Russians advanced slowly but steadily towards the frontiers of India. By 1850 the gap between the British and Russian Empires had narrowed to not much more than 1,000 miles, whereas it had been 4,000 miles in the early 18th Century. With every passing year, the British and Russians became more and more interested in the territory that separated them, the buffer states running in a crescent round northern India: Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. The competition for influence in those regions came to be called the "Great Game."

But the game was not merely a kind of political chess in central Asia. Move and counter-move here reflected Anglo-Russian rivalry right across Europe and Asia, as far afield as China and Korea.

In the Middle East there was a direct conflict of interest. The British were determined to check Russia in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey and Persia since their commercial and military communications ran through those areas. They were especially keen to control the Sultan of Turkey since, as suzerain of Egypt, he ruled the territory through which ran the Suez Canal, Britain's lifeline to India. The Russians for their part were equally determined to control the Sultan, since he was also the guardian of the Straits at Constantinople, "the key to Russia's house," as Tsar Nicholas II put it to Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, when the Tsar was at Balmoral in 1896.

For more than half a century there seemed little hope of compromise. After the Crimean War of 1854–56, which nearly ruined Russia as a great power, and the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58, which thoroughly alarmed the British, both powers felt acutely vulnerable. In their redoubled efforts to defend their interests, they employed an armoury of policies: competition for political influence at the courts of the Sultan of Turkey, the Shah of Persia, and the Amir of Afghanistan; trade and investment for political ends; strategic railways; military expeditions; and perhaps most important of all, allies in Europe. In the second half of the 19th Century, Britain could usually count on Austria-Hungary, and sometimes on France and Germany, to help frustrate Russia in the Straits and the Medi-



As the map shows (left), Britain could best preserve her interests by maintaining a barrier of neutral states between India and the Russian Empire. The most vital buffer state was Afghanistan, on the wild North-West Frontier. The relief map (above), its vertical scale exaggerated for emphasis, graphically demonstrates that the Himalayas were a formidable barrier to any invader from Tibet in the north-east.

TRINCOMALE
KANDY
P^TDE GALLE
ANOORADHAPOOR
COLOMBO
CEYLON
GULF OF MANAR
RAMNAD
CAPE COMORIN
QUILON
COCHIN
PONDICHERY
MADRAS
MADRAS ROADS
O F
G A L
I N D I
CALLICUT
SERINGAPATAM
BANGALORE
MADRAS RALY
MANGALORE
GOA
O C E
BELLARY
DARWAR
CHOUL
POONAH
BOMBAY
PARINDA
HYDRABAD
AHMEDNUGGER
INDRABAD
AURUNGABAD
BASSEIN
GULF OF CAMBAY
SURAT
CALCUTTA
MOORSHEDABAD
PATNA
ALLAHABAD
LUCKNOW
JOOMAGURH
MOOLTAN
LAHORE
KALA BAGH
PINDEE
MAPORA

terranean. In the end, the fate of both British and Russian Empires had to be resolved in Europe, where the players of the Great Game sat.

On this vast diplomatic chessboard, India was a vital piece. The British valued India more highly than any of their other imperial possessions; for its lucrative trade, for British investment there, for the troops India provided and the commanding position she gave in southern Asia and, perhaps most of all, because to lose India would ruin the reputation for invincibility on which British imperial rule depended.

Thoughtful British officials were aware that India, with its population of nearly 300 million and an area as large as Europe, could not be held by force alone. One of the most celebrated British proconsuls, Lord Cromer, used to say that the secret of government in the East was low taxation of the peasantry. To hold India, the burdens of Empire had to be light enough, and the benefits of Empire great enough, to make British rule acceptable to the subject population.

The Russians knew of their opponents' sensitivity, and used the threat of advancing through central Asia – with its attendant possibility of arousing Indian dreams of independence – as a bargaining counter to make the British more pliant elsewhere. In a celebrated phrase of the time, the keys of Constantinople might be won on the banks of the Helmund (a river in Afghanistan). As a result, successive British governments watched with apprehension as Russia advanced through central Asia, across the deserts round the Aral Sea and towards the more fertile regions of Turkestan. Beyond that lay the Hindu Kush and the Pamir Mountains, the natural defences of north-western India.

What the British feared was that Russia might establish her influence in this area – say, in eastern Persia or Afghanistan – and use it as a base to stir up rebellions among the mountain tribesmen of the North-West Frontier. These races, mostly Muslims, provided a large part of the manpower in the Indian Army. If Russia could successfully manipulate the rulers of Afghanistan and Persia, or the Sultan of Turkey, religious leader of the Muslim world, India might become ungovernable as her Muslim troops joined a Russian-inspired holy war against the ruling British infidels.

Unfortunately, there was no way of preventing the Russians advancing southwards. In quick succession between 1860 and 1865, they took Turkestan, Tchimkent and finally Tashkent, thus moving uncomfortably close to the borders of Afghanistan. The Russian Chancellor, Prince Alexander Gorchakov, explained that this would be a limited advance. He was probably sincere, but new conflicts precipitated by the unsubmissive inhabitants of central Asia drew the Russians farther and farther south. Besides, military officers in the field were not easily controlled from remote St. Petersburg. General Konstantin Kaufmann, soon established at Tashkent as Governor-General of Turkestan, quickly began to emulate Alexander the Great and Genghiz Khan by taking Samarkand, fragrant city of domes and minarets. By 1869 the Russians were in Krasnovodsk, on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, and they were ready for further conquests.

Worried about the safety of Afghanistan, the British initially decided to try direct negotiations with St. Petersburg, and were somewhat reassured when Gorchakov told them that this country lay "completely outside the sphere within which Russia might be called upon to exercise her influence." Even into the early 1870s, despite Russia's continuing advance, the Liberal government under Gladstone still placed its trust in a direct understanding with Russia.

But it was becoming ever more plain that whatever Russian Chancellors might say or mean, Russian progress was not halting. The Conservative government which came to power under Disraeli in the spring of 1874 decided to adopt a considerably harder line.

The new Secretary of State for India was the Marquess of Salisbury, a man who had more continuous influence on British policy in the late 19th Century than any other statesman. It was his firm opinion that stories of a Russian invasion of India were "chimera." People who believed them, he used to say, had merely been studying maps of too small a scale. Nevertheless, he did take the indirect threat of Russian influence seriously and he felt acutely the lack of reliable intelligence about what was actually going on beyond the Indian frontier.

The governments of Britain and India had virtually no information, except that coming from St. Petersburg, which was obviously tainted, or from Teheran. The native agent they kept at Kabul was completely under the thumb of Sher Ali, the Amir of Afghanistan, and reported to Calcutta or Simla only what Sher Ali wanted him to report. Salisbury put his remedy very cogently to the Prime Minister in October, 1875: Britain must have a reliable agent in Afghanistan.

"We want to guide the Ameer," he wrote "and to watch; for there is the double danger that he may play us false or, remaining true, may blunder into operations which will bring him into collision with Russia. . . . The Ameer is genuinely frightened of the Russians: and every advance they make will make him more pliable, until their power on his frontier seems to him so great, and he is so convinced of our timidity, that he thinks [it] safer to tie himself to them than to us."

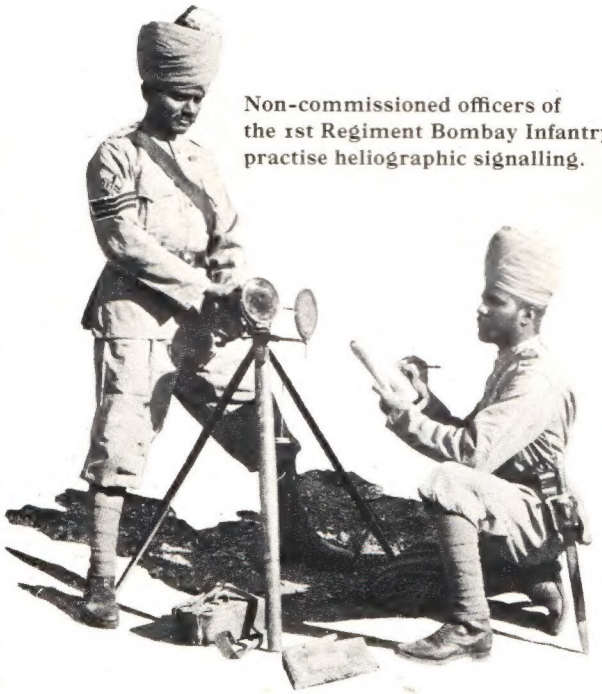
As a result of this, the next Viceroy, Lord Lytton, made many proposals to Sher Ali for closer relations with his country. But the Amir ignored most of them, and by 1877 the only result of the new policy had been an abortive meeting between the agents of the two governments. The Afghan representative was so violently anti-British – he was only prepared to discuss unconditional and apparently unlimited British military aid – that the meetings were abandoned.

This disappointment was all the more disconcerting to the British because they faced increasing pressure in the other major theatre of the Great Game, the Near East. Russia went to war with Turkey in 1877, and by early 1878 seemed on the point of seizing the "keys to her house" from the Sultan. But Britain managed to secure the support of Austria-Hungary, alarmed by Russia's military advance into the Balkans, and they called Russia to order at the Congress of Berlin

Indian Soldiers of the Queen

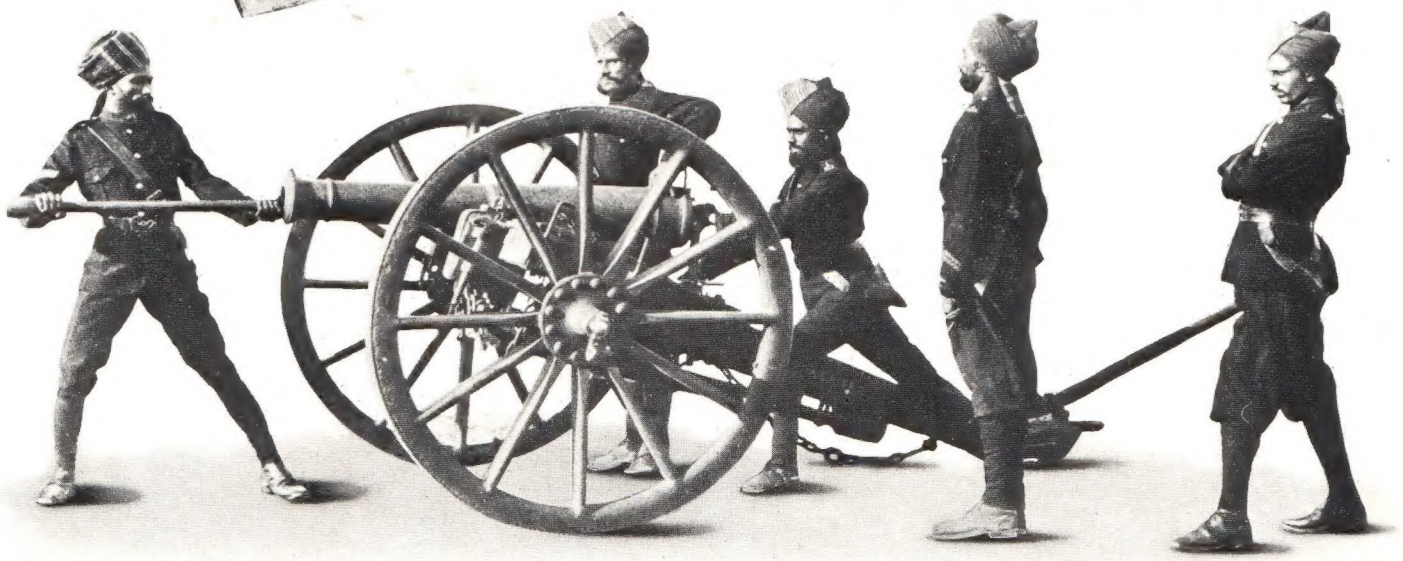
The Indian Army, which was geared to the defence of the North-West Frontier, consisted mainly of sepoys, natives serving under British officers in the armies of Madras, Bombay and Bengal. Some of the native troops are illustrated here. Before the Mutiny of the Bengal Army in 1857–58, there were 238,000 Indian and only 45,000 British troops; afterwards there was a radical reorganization. The British numbers were increased to 65,000 and the Indians reduced to 140,000, a ratio of two Indians to one Briton, except in the mutinous Bengal Army. There the ratio was one-to-one. No Indian officers were commissioned until the 1880s, and then they served only in an overseas regiment named the Imperial Service Corps. Another gradual change was the recruitment of more of the warlike peoples – Pathans, Sikhs and Gurkhas – from the frontier area itself.

Sikh Lancers from the Punjab, serving in the 13th (Duke of Connaught's) Regiment of Bengal, pose with one of their horses.



Non-commissioned officers of the 1st Regiment Bombay Infantry practise heliographic signalling.

Pipers of the 40th Bengal Infantry were Pathans, wiry hillsmen from the Afghan border.



Hindus and Muslims, working together in the Hyderabad Field Battery, demonstrate artillery drill.

in 1878. The British could breathe a sigh of relief at having survived, if not won, another round in the Great Game.

But then, while the British were absorbed by the Near East conflict, Russia renewed pressure in central Asia. Her aim was probably to frighten Britain into being more amenable in the Near East, and for a short time the situation looked decidedly alarming. On the very day the Congress of Berlin opened, a Russian mission left for Kabul, capital of Afghanistan. Emissaries set out to spy in south Turkestan, and plans were drawn up, on orders from St. Petersburg, for an advance towards India. Sher Ali declared a holy war against the British.

However, just as the Russian emissary, Stolietov, approached Kabul, melancholy news arrived for him from Berlin: the Congress was all over, and Russia had been humiliated. Stolietov was left suspended in mid-air. He had better make no promises, he was told, and should "not go generally as far as would have been desirable if war had threatened." He was, nevertheless, in Kabul; indeed he was received with considerable pomp.

Lytton, the Viceroy, was enraged: "We were told our warnings were witless, our conclusions airy fabrics . . . but within the year Russia has made greater strides towards India that were 'dreamed of in our' repudiated 'philosophy.'" He proposed that a rival British mission, too, should be sent to Kabul and this time the home government agreed. The mission was placed under the command of General Sir Neville Chamberlain, a hot-headed man of 58. Chamberlain set out from Peshawar towards the end of September, 1878, preceded by a letter telling Sher Ali that the mission must be as well received as Russia's. Sher Ali, ominously, made no reply.

At the frontier Chamberlain sent forward to negotiate with the Afghans an officer who was soon to play a tragic part in relations between the governments of India and Afghanistan, Major Pierre Louis Napoleon Cavagnari. Half-French and half-Irish, charming and brilliant, he had long been a legendary figure on the frontier. He knew its people intimately. He was told to ride into the Khyber Pass with a small escort and to ask leave for the party to proceed.

Cavagnari soon learned that the road was blocked. He halted. The Afghan general, Faiz Mohamed Khan, who was a friend of his and commander of the Afghan troops in the pass, came down to visit him. The Afghan said that under instructions from Kabul he would resist the entry of the mission. He added: "You may take it as a kindness and because I remember friendship, that I do not fire on you." Cavagnari saw the threatening demeanour of the Afghan troops and prudently left.

The government of India reported immediately to London: "The repulse of Sir Neville Chamberlain by Sher Ali at his frontier while the Russian mission are still at his capital has proved the inutility of diplomatic expedients, and has deprived the Amir of all further claim on our forbearance."

This historic photograph shows Major Louis Napoleon Cavagnari, head of the British mission (second from left), and the Amir Yakub Khan (second from right) surrounded by assistants. Only a few weeks later the British mission was murdered; the Amir did little to save them.

Although a military force was already assembling in India, the home government remained cautious, instructing that the Amir be asked to apologize and to receive a permanent mission. By November 20 Sher Ali had still not replied. Then three columns of British and Indian soldiers advanced into Afghanistan.

One column was under the command of General Frederick Roberts, who was soon to prove himself an inspiring leader and become a legendary figure in imperial history. He now had his first chance to display his skill in taking strongly defended positions by daring outflanking movements. Moving up to the border along the valley of the Kurram River, he found the way forward blocked by Afghans concealed in the precipitous, pine-clad hills of the Peiwar Kotal Pass.

That evening, leaving the camp-fires still burning, Roberts led 1,300 men in a stumbling, night-time climb up a side ravine. He surprised the Afghans at daybreak, overran their forward positions, brought up cannon and battered the main camp until the Afghans fled. By early December, his force was no more than 60 miles from Kabul. The other two columns made rapid progress to the towns of Kandahar and Gandamak.

In despair, Sher Ali announced to the British that he was leaving for St. Petersburg, where he mistakenly thought the Congress of Berlin was sitting and where "the history of the transactions between myself and yourselves will be submitted to all the powers."

But Sher Ali had been abandoned by his erstwhile Russian protectors. The treaty he had made with them had already been denounced in St. Petersburg and Stolietov's mission had been withdrawn. When Sher Ali reached Tashkent to plead for help, General Kaufmann replied with a polished, diplomatic rebuff: "Your Highness requests me to send troops. Probably you have not yet received the information that His Majesty the Emperor, desirous to help Your Highness, has succeeded in negotiations with Great Britain in obtaining what the British Government formally promised to our ambassador in London, that the independence of Afghanistan will be respected." With this Sher Ali had to rest content. No doubt disillusioned by the incomprehensible diplomatic manœuvrings of the Great Game, he died immediately afterwards.

His son Yakub Khan, to whom he had committed the government, made overtures to the British and, after negotiations with Cavagnari in May, 1879, signed the Treaty of Gandamak, in which he agreed to cede some territory on the frontier, to receive an annual subsidy and a British envoy at Kabul, and to conduct his foreign policy according to British wishes. In return, he would be supported against external aggression.

Nevertheless, the men on the spot were far from convinced of the Amir's sincerity; General Roberts in particular had his doubts for he had intercepted a remarkable message from Yakub to one of the Afghan tribes. It read: "By the favour of God, and in accordance with the verse 'verily God has destroyed the powerful ones,' the whole of them will go to fire of Hell for evermore. Therefore kill them to the extent of your ability." The "powerful ones" were clearly the British officers and troops.

In accordance with Yakub's treaty, the British troops in Afghanistan began to withdraw at once, though many, includ-

Troops present arms as the British negotiator, Major Cavagnari, and an aide (foreground) meet the Amir of Afghanistan in May, 1879. The Treaty of Gandamak, signed soon after, ended the Second Afghan War and set up Cavagnari as head of Britain's first permanent mission in Kabul.

ing Roberts, naturally had serious reservations about the wisdom of doing so when no serious defeat had been inflicted upon the Afghans. As Roberts and his column were moving out they fell in with Cavagnari, who had been appointed envoy and was on his way to take charge of the mission at Kabul.

That night, July 15, 1879, they all dined together. Roberts was asked to propose the envoy's health, "but somehow," he recalled, "I did not feel equal to the task. I was so depressed and my mind was filled with such gloomy forebodings as to the fate of these fine fellows that I could not utter a word. Like many others, I thought that peace had been signed too quickly, before, in fact, we had instilled that awe of us . . . which would have been the only reliable guarantee for the safety of the mission."

Cavagnari, in the highest spirits, spoke confidently of the prospects. The next morning they all set off and soon met an escort of Afghan cavalry. Tea was served ceremoniously in a tent and then dinner, in handsome style on a carpet. Every civility was shown to the mission. Roberts recorded afterwards how his heart sank as he finally parted from Cavagnari. "When we had proceeded a few yards in our different directions, we both turned round, retraced our steps, shook hands once more, and parted forever."

Roberts marched back to Simla and Cavagnari forward to Kabul. After his arrival, he reported cheerfully at the end of August: "I personally believe that Yakub Khan will turn out to be a very good ally, and that we shall be able to keep him to his engagements."

In the early hours of September 5, Roberts, now back in Simla, was awakened by a man from the telegraph office. He brought a message that the residency at Kabul had been sacked by Afghan soldiers. Possibly Cavagnari was already dead. In Delhi, the Viceroy's council met in the middle of that night. If the report were confirmed, they decided that an army must go to Kabul at once and Roberts had the only force able to take the field at short notice. "You may well resent," wrote the distraught Viceroy to Disraeli, "the undeserved hostility of the stars in their courses."

Later on in the day further telegrams showed that the worst had indeed happened: the whole of Cavagnari's party had been murdered. Three mutinous Afghan regiments, whose pay was in arrears, had attacked the hated foreigners. Cavagnari had sent frantic messages to the Amir, under whose protection the mission was residing at Kabul. Yakub Khan replied feebly that his horoscope was bad. All he did was send his eight-year-old son, accompanied by attendants and holding the Koran aloft, in an attempt to pacify the rioters. The boy was ignored and the Commander-in-Chief, Daud Shah, attempting to quell the riot, found himself unhorsed by stones and spears.

The Afghans set fire to the doorway, which collapsed. Then they swarmed in upstairs, slaughtered the remaining defenders and destroyed the place. Cavagnari died early in the engagement. The small British and Indian escort of the mission defended it to the last with unbelievable bravery. Every native soldier was posthumously awarded the Indian Order of Merit, the highest decoration for bravery then open to Indians.

The bewildered Amir wrote: "Afghanistan is ruined: the troops, city and surrounding country have thrown off their yoke of allegiance. . . . After God I look to the government [of India] for aid and advice. . . . I am terribly grieved and perplexed."

Thus Roberts returned to Kabul, where he found Yakub Khan "an insignificant looking man . . . with a conical shaped head and no chin to speak of . . . entirely wanting in that force of character without which no one could hope to govern or hold in check the warlike and turbulent people of Afghanistan. He was possessed, moreover, of a very shifty eye, could not look one straight in the face and from the first . . . his appearance tallied exactly with the double-dealing imputed to him."

Roberts inspected the ruined fort in which Cavagnari and his mission had been murdered. The floors were covered in bleaching bones and dried, black blood, the walls pitted and marked by bullets. He staged a ceremonial entry into the Afghan capital with a cavalry brigade and five battalions of infantry. "This has been a very eventful day," he wrote to his wife, "and now I am really King of Kabul. It is not a kingdom I covet, and I shall be right glad to get out of it, but the occasion seemed worthy of a glass of champagne."

He set the seal on his newly established authority by executing 49 Afghans for complicity in Cavagnari's murder, and he placed garrisons in the major towns. The hapless Yakub Khan proffered his resignation. "I would rather," said he, "be a grass-cutter in the English camp than the ruler of Afghanistan." The resignation was accepted and Abdur Rahman, an old rival of Sher Ali, was set to rule Afghanistan in his stead.

After all this, the British government decided not to insist any longer on maintaining an agent at Kabul. Even Roberts came to believe that the less the British were seen in Afghanistan the better they would be liked; and that if Russia should try to seize Afghanistan, or march through it to India, Britain would be more likely to attract the Afghan's support if she had refrained from interfering in their affairs in the meantime.

Before Roberts left Afghanistan for good, however, he was called upon to perform an exploit, the 300-mile march from Kabul to Kandahar, which, although less difficult than some that he had already achieved, became celebrated in the military annals of the British Empire.

A new local ruler, one loyal to the British, had been installed in Kandahar but a younger and more forceful brother of Yakub Khan, Ayub, seized power with the intention of driving out the British. He gathered a large army of tribesmen and advanced on Kandahar. A British and Indian brigade, 2,500 strong, was sent out to stop the Afghans and seize Ayub. At Maiwand, 50 miles north-west of Kandahar, the two forces met, and the British saw with horror that the Afghans outnumbered them 10 to one. The result was catastrophe: the British artillery shot off all its ammunition in a hopeless attempt to snatch rapid victory, leaving their force open to an Afghan assault that killed a third of the British and Indian troops.

Ayub then continued his advance and laid siege to Kandahar. This reverse caused excitement on the North-West Frontier and in India itself; it produced what Roberts, who had himself fought in

the battles of 1857, described as "a certain feeling of uneasiness – a mere surface ripple – but enough to make those who remembered the days of the Mutiny anxious for better news."

He telegraphed confidently to the Viceroy: "You need have no fears about my division. It can take care of itself and will reach Kandahar under the month."

Authority to move was received on August 3, 1880. Roberts's force had just under 10,000 soldiers all told, with 8,000 followers, 18 guns and no less than 11,000 transport animals, ponies, donkeys, camels and mules.

To move such an army in health and safety was a formidable task. Roberts tackled the whole business in a methodical way. In the first four days the column was made to march but 46 miles, so that the men and animals should become acclimatized and able to manage longer distances in the later stages. The whole column was normally roused at 2.45 a.m. or even earlier. By 4.0 a.m. the camp was clear. After each hour of marching the men had ten minutes' rest, with 20 minutes for breakfast at 8.0 a.m. Between 10.0 a.m. and noon camp would be made for the night.

Such tight organization was vital to meet the challenge posed by the Afghans, by terrain and by weather. At the back of each column hovered Afghan tribesmen, ready to kill off stragglers. The freezing temperatures of early morning often climbed by noon to 110 degrees Fahrenheit and the skin peeled in strips from the exposed faces and hands of the British soldiers.

Roberts himself remained a tower of strength. "The scenery is not inviting," he wrote to his wife of one day's march, "nothing visible all round but bare hills, not a tree to be seen. . . . My great pleasure is to do all I can for the soldiers, they are grand fellows and undergo severe hardships without a murmur. . . . You must expect to see more grey hairs and less hair on my head, but otherwise I hope you won't find me altered. . . . I never knew how much I could stand before or how easy I should find the command of a large body of troops to be." In the last stages of the march, however, Roberts was so enfeebled by fever that he had to be carried, for he could no longer sit astride his horse.

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Barring the Door to India

Afghanistan, the door to India, had to be closed against Russia, the British Press agreed. But how? As these cartoons show, opinion changed with events. At first it heartily welcomed the Treaty of Gandamak, signed in 1879, as an end to the unpopular war in Afghanistan. Peace and diplomacy had won the day. Not a thought was given to the permanent British mission now set up by the treaty in the lawless Afghan capital, Kabul. But when, three months later, the entire mission was massacred, the Press vociferously demanded war.

A Russian, padlocked out by the Treaty of Gandamak, stands bemused outside the door to British India in this cartoon published by *Punch's* sister-magazine, *Judy*.

After the massacre of the British mission, *Judy* sternly feeds the unwilling Afghan his rightful portion of British rule. A treacherous ally, he must now be thoroughly punished.

The Bala Hissar, "high fort," had been the palace and citadel at Kabul of the rulers of Afghanistan since the 5th Century. With its 20-foot-high and

KABUL TO KANDAHAR

Within a month of the murder of the British mission in Afghanistan on September 4, 1879, a British force under the popular General Sir Frederick Roberts was occupying the Bala Hissar citadel in Kabul. British authority in Afghanistan seemed to be complete. Then, in July, 1880, came news of a British defeat; a brigade had been practically wiped out by Ayub Khan, a claimant for the vacant Afghan throne, and the British in Kandahar were under siege.

On August 11, 1880, Roberts set out to relieve Kandahar and smash the rebellious Ayub Khan. It was an epic march. In just 21 days, his force of 10,000 men, 8,000 followers, 8,250 pack animals and 18 guns covered 313 miles over the mountains between Kabul and Kandahar under appalling conditions. At night it was freezing. At noon the temperature soared to 110 degrees. Dust-storms raged and delays forced a cut in rations. When the troops reached Kandahar, Roberts, weak with fever, struggled on to his horse to lead in his troops, a thousand of whom were also sick or exhausted. Yet he was so inspiring a leader that the morale of his troops was higher than that of the comparatively comfortable besieged garrison. As Roberts neared, Ayub Khan cautiously withdrew a mile or two from the city. The next day Roberts smashed his opponents by skilful deployment of his cavalry and artillery. The brilliant victory and the march became linked as a great imperial legend and "Bobs" was later raised to the peerage as Lord Roberts of Kandahar.

General Roberts was affectionately nicknamed "Bobs" by his men.

12-foot-thick walls, it dominated the city. General Roberts occupied it from the time he arrived until he set out on his long march to Kandahar.

The British cavalry routs the fleeing Afghans in this contemporary and highly patriotic painting of the victory at Kandahar in 1880.

Tsarist troops, the bogey-men feared by the British, stop for a meal in the Russian town of Baku on the Caspian Sea before continuing their march towards the Afghan border.

The force went forward without serious opposition. On hearing of its approach, Ayub Khan raised the siege of Kandahar and moved to a position north of the city. Roberts and his men reached there on the last day of August, having covered 313 miles from Kabul and fulfilled the promise to reach Kandahar in less than a month. He found the garrison distinctly demoralized: "They seemed to consider themselves hopelessly defeated and were utterly despondent," said Roberts, "they never even hoisted the Union Jack till the relieving force was close at hand."

Ayub's forces were encamped on the hills. At once Roberts decided to outflank them with a feinting movement. The deception worked perfectly; the whole of Ayub's wheeled artillery was captured; and after desperate fighting with fixed bayonets he was defeated by the evening of September 1. "The day was intensely hot," recorded Roberts, "but I struggled on determined to be in at the end, and I was rewarded for my trouble. You never heard such cheers as the men received me with. I went to each regiment and battery separately, they cheered me again and again. I felt very proud."

It was the march to Kandahar more than anything that established Roberts's reputation. For some time his fate was unknown to the outside world and in Britain the public was in an agony of suspense until all was known to be well. Thereafter, his personality assured him of continuing fame. Despite his unprepossessing appearance, he was fearless and incredibly energetic, yet he had a Christian humility that endeared him to troops and public alike. Sir Francis Younghusband, himself to play a vital role in the Great Game later on, wrote of him: "He had that wonderful buoyant way of carrying you along with him and livening you up – making you feel that all things were possible."

The British promised the new Amir, Abdur Rahman, that they would aid him against unprovoked aggression "to such an extent and in such a manner as may appear to the British government necessary . . . provided that Your Highness follows unreservedly the advice of the British Government in regard to your external relations."

The value of this promise was limited, however, by the fact that the new Liberal government in London had reverted to the line of defending India by direct agreement with St. Petersburg. This policy again brought disappointment. The Russians advanced once more, launching a major operation in January, 1881, against the fortress of the Tekke Turcomans at Geok-Tepe on the very border of northern Persia. The fortress was surrounded by a wall $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles in circumference, 18 feet high and up to 30 feet thick. It took 60 guns, 7,000 Russian troops, a siege of more than three weeks and a mine containing more than a ton of gunpowder to overcome the defenders. When the fortress fell, fugitives fleeing across the plain were slaughtered in thousands and four days of looting followed. Even five years later, when Russian military bands played for the opening of a new railway at near-by Ashkabad, terrified Turcomans flung themselves to the ground in terror; so deeply had the massacre ingrained itself in their tribal consciousness that any hint that Russian military operations might be imminent revived memories of the earlier incident.

The commanding general, the dashing Mikhail Skobeley, nicknamed the "White

General" for his habit of wearing a white uniform, was a man of large ideas. He apparently regarded his triumph at Geok-Tepe as only a preliminary move in another round of the Great Game, with the Balkan Peninsula as the objective. He was strongly in favour of "a serious demonstration in the direction of India" and a "powerful body of troops, fully equipped and seriously mobilised." With these at the gates of central Asia, he felt that a war in the corresponding theatre, the Balkans, would be a feasible proposition. Once again, central Asia was being played as a Great Game card in the Near Eastern struggle.

Though others in St. Petersburg were, as usual, more circumspect than the general in the field, the Russians continued their steady advance into the territory along the Afghan border.

When in 1884 they took Merv, a town very close to the border, the India Office in London drew up a memorandum of nearly 150 pages, listing Russia's many assurances and concluding that they were practically worthless. The British government now agreed to the construction of more frontier railways just inside the Indian border.

There was a further reason for this positive action: they now had a buffer state worth the effort. The new Amir, Abdur Rahman, had suppressed revolts and disaffection; and, although often cantankerous in his dealings with the government of India, he had shown no inclination whatever to lean on the Russians. In April, 1885, the British received him with much ceremony in a durbar at Rawalpindi. There, with the Cabinet's authority, the Viceroy promised him that a Russian advance on Herat, the Afghan town closest to the Russian spearhead, would mean war. Abdur Rahman said that he entirely favoured the British alliance, and excused in advance any opposition from his subjects whom he engagingly characterized as "rude, uneducated and suspicious." He would be glad, he declared, to receive money, arms and munitions; and he swore to stand by Britain: "With this sword I hope to smite any enemy of the British government."

Whether Britain would be equally willing, or able, to smite any enemies of Abdur Rahman remained to be seen. That same evening, news arrived that the Russians had attacked Penjdeh, a town inside Afghan territory. Abdur Rahman heard the tidings quite calmly and took leave in good heart, remarking how pleased and gratified he had been at the sight of the British Army. In reality, however, there was little the British could do to help him in an area so remote from their Indian communications, and so near to Russia's. Their best chance of deterring Russia would have been to strike at her ports on the Black Sea. But the British had to pay the price for Gladstone's neglect of Britain's traditional friends. Austria was now the ally of Germany and Russia, and joined with those powers in forbidding the Turks to allow the passage of British warships into the Black Sea.

Lord Salisbury managed to salvage something from the wreck when he be-

A Russian officer prepares his Cossacks for the advance to the Afghan town of Pendjeh in 1884. This invasion of neutral Afghanistan brought the two Empires of Russia and Britain to the brink of war.

came Prime Minister in June, 1885. At once he took a stronger line with the Russians, even threatening war if they would not restore to the Afghans the strategically important Zulficar Pass, which commanded a plain on the borders of northern Afghanistan.

It was probably a crisis in the Near East, however, that saved the situation for Britain. In September an upheaval in Bulgaria threatened to extinguish Russian influence altogether in that principality and to reduce the Tsar's importance throughout the southern Balkan Peninsula. Since this commanded the approaches to the Straits at Constantinople, Russia's dream of possessing "the keys to her house" became even more of an illusion. Preoccupied with this setback, Russia gave way in central Asia. Though she kept Penjdeh, she evacuated the Zulficar Pass in September.

Worse was to come for Russia in the Near East. The British managed to re-enlist the support of Austria, and then of Italy, and by the end of 1887 these three powers succeeded in destroying the remainder of Russia's influence in Bulgaria and even in undermining her influence at Constantinople itself. The Tsar was reduced to describing the ruler of the tiny principality of Montenegro as "Russia's only friend in Europe." For a few years Russia retired sullenly within herself, to nurse her wounds and build a big Black Sea fleet in order to bring the Sultan of Turkey to heel. Now all was quiet in central Asia and the Amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman, was more convinced than ever of Britain's power: "I look upon the kind of friendship of the illustrious British Government as the cause of the flourishing of the tree of the Afghan government."

Nevertheless, while the powers were concentrating on the Near East, and while Britain inaugurated a huge programme of naval building, Russia's railways in central Asia were steadily extended; in 1886 to Merv, and two years later to Samarkand. Branches were extended to Tashkent and from Merv to Kushk, right on the Afghan frontier.

In the autumn of 1888, along this newly completed line, travelled a 29-year-old British Member of Parliament, George Nathaniel Curzon, soon to be the youngest and perhaps most brilliant Viceroy of India. This expedition was of vital significance, for it helped to form the opinions of the man who was to exercise a deep influence on the Great Game in its later stages, especially on the north-east frontier of India.

He went by way of Moscow, where he noted an overpowering Russian dislike for Germany and a certain respect for the British, despite the two countries' political hostility. He then proceeded through the Caucasus to Tiflis and Baku; across the Caspian and from Ashkabad through central Asia to Tashkent.

Curzon watched how the Russians concentrated a force to support an abortive revolt against the rule of Abdur Rahman. "This railway," he wrote, "makes them prodigiously strong, and they mean business." The region served by the railway, Curzon found, was one vast armed camp, in which during several weeks of journeying the traveller saw scarcely a Russian civilian. All the same, the Russian soldiers fraternized cheerfully with the local inhabitants and their rule was popular.

Though Curzon conceded that Russia, once embarked on southern conquest, could not have stopped short of Geok-Tepe or Merv or Tashkent, he thought it was impossible that she might actually overrun India. A limited Russian invasion, however, he thought quite practicable: its purpose would be to secure Russian control of the Straits at Constantinople, not of the River Ganges.

He also rightly discerned that Russian policy was not coherent but haphazard, with no central direction from St. Petersburg. Britain, he concluded, should meet each move with a counter-move, not holding out for the impossible, but making clear what she was determined to hold.

Although Curzon was later represented, not least in the Russian Press, as a determined opponent, there is nothing mean or grudging in his account of Russia's policy and prospects in central Asia. His views and experiences were set out in a series of newspaper articles which attracted wide attention at the time, and

Wild Men of the North

The Great Game would have been played according to very different rules if the North-West Frontier had been a flat plain inhabited by a docile people. But the frontier between India and Afghanistan ran along some of the highest mountains in the world, perfect terrain for guerrilla warfare. And the inhabitants, renowned for their pride and ferocity, exploited their tactical advantages to the full. Between 1850 and 1900, the British sent out no less than 40 expeditions to subdue uprisings.

Russia took full advantage of this weak spot in India's armour, and did all she could to encourage the frontier risings, hoping ultimately to set the whole of India ablaze with rebellion.

The majority of these independent tribesmen were Pathans, whose own name for themselves is "Pukhtunwala," the men who speak the Pushtu language. They are from the same stock as the Afghans, a tough and wiry Turko-Iranian people with admixtures of blood from the many races that have met in central Asia over the centuries. Though one race, features and colouring vary considerably. They think of themselves, not so much as Pathans, but as Afridis (who controlled the Khyber Pass), Wazirs, Mahsuds or Mohmands and their fierce loyalties are to tribe, clan and family.

The first law of the Pathans is the law of revenge, *badal*. Every insult must be avenged, even if whole families are wiped out. Grievances usually stem from *zar*, *zan* or *zamin*: gold, women or land.

The second law is *melmastia*, or hospitality, and this is so strong that it takes precedence over *badal* on some occasions. Refuge must be granted even to an enemy who seeks it.

Besides the Pathans, numerous other peoples inhabit these inhospitable regions, notably the almost equally warlike Ghilzais who claim descent from Noah. The whole Frontier, indeed, is an ethnological jigsaw of tribes that include the Kafirs, Chitralis, Mohmands, Shinwaris, Adridis, Orakzais, Bannuchis, Waziris, Dawaris, Marwats and Bhittanis.

The British troops who fought through a long list of 19th-Century campaigns felt a strange comradeship with their enemy. They respected these frontier tribes whose insurrections provided the bulk of military campaigning in India and the combat training of many officers. One British soldier wrote, "A stranger could know that, however hard the task and beset with danger, here was a people who looked him in the face and made him feel he had come home."

Sir Richard Udny, the Political Adviser to the British expedition against the Afridi tribesmen in 1879, reads out the stern terms of surrender.

The British camp in the Khyber Pass looked peaceful enough in 1898, but the troops were under a constant threat from the warlike Afridis.

a consolidated work, *Russia in Central Asia*, helped to establish him, at the age of 30, as one of the world's leading commentators on Asiatic affairs.

Between 1887 and 1894 he made four visits to India and two to the Far East, and spent several months in Persia. He was convinced – and Russian documentary evidence now proves him right – that Russia was steadily tightening her hold over Persia and hoping ultimately to gain access to a warm-water port in the Persian Gulf. The capital, Teheran, which lay so inconveniently close to the Russian frontier, might even come under Russian domination in the near future. Not that Curzon despaired of Britain's capacity to thwart her: if Russia was exploiting Britain's weakness on land, Britain could trade upon Russia's weakness at sea.

These questions did not become acute until the turn of the century, however, when Curzon was himself in a position to do something about them. For the present, as a private person, he gained some insight into another and somewhat older theatre of the Great Game.

In 1894, by persistence and flattery, he secured from Abdur Rahman an invitation to visit Kabul. There he was accommodated in the finest suite. His bed had sheets of cherry-coloured silk, a pillow of flowered silk, quilts of brocade with gold and lace trimming. The Amir received him graciously and spoke of Britain's duty to send troops to Afghanistan in the event of a Russian invasion. He asked why the British wasted their money on fortifications between his country and India: "We are members of the same house, and to that house there should be but one wall." He also explained to Curzon how he had come to hate the Russians: he had been virtually their prisoner for 12 years, and had secretly learned their language. "I have often heard them tell their true minds," he said, "calling me a poor ignorant barbaric Afghan, and laughing at what they proposed to do with me. I have bided my time and have never forgiven them."

Abdur Rahman also described to Curzon, with no apparent remorse, how he had suppressed numerous rebellions. To the best of his memory, he said, he had put to death about 120,000 of his own people. After one revolt, he had blinded thousands of tribesmen with quicklime. He superintended everything in his country and seemed "the brains and eyes and ears of Afghanistan." He would, Curzon predicted, remain essentially loyal to the British connection, though probably troublesome on the frontier and prickly to deal with. For his part, the Amir judged his visitor to be a genial, ambitious, shrewd, and hard-working young man. This meeting was to have more than merely personal interest: within a few years, Curzon was Viceroy of India, and dealing on very different terms with his host in Kabul.

The international sparring between Russia and Great Britain had by now entered into a quieter phase in the Near East. After the fall from power of Bismarck in 1890, Germany joined Britain, Austria-Hungary and Italy to checkmate Russian ambitions for increased influence in the Balkans and Turkey.

In central Asia, alarms continued. A British officer was expelled from the Pamirs – a mountainous tongue of land at the end of the Hindu Kush range that extended southwards between Afghanistan and China towards India – on the ground that this was Russian territory. Although the region had practically no intrinsic worth, the British showed themselves determined to hold Russia back because one of the passes, which the Foreign Secretary, Lord Rosebery, somewhat fancifully termed "the Gibraltar of the Hindu Kush," controlled the access to Chitral, a Kashmir border province. The Russians did not press the point. With some difficulty, the Russo-Afghan and Indo-Afghan frontiers were delimited between 1893 and 1895. The Russian and British Empires were now separated by a strip but a few miles broad.

For most of the 1890s, however, Russia concentrated on Europe and the Far East. The Tsarevitch, the future Nicholas II, dug the first shovelful of earth to start building the trans-Siberian railway in 1891, and in 1893 Russia made an alliance with France. In a roundabout way, this had an effect on the Game in central Asia. The Franco-Russian alliance raised fears in Britain, for it was possible that the new allies might block the passage of the Mediterranean by the British fleet. In that event, Britain could not coerce Turkey – and thus protect the route to India – except from positions in Egypt, the Red Sea and Persia.

In central Asia, the situation was approaching deadlock. The Russians' hold on northern Persia tightened, not least because they were willing to find money to finance local operations when the British were not. In Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman, despite an increased subsidy and massive amounts of arms and ammunition, eluded a request for more definite military arrangements. Some new initiative was needed.

It came from Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. On India's other great land frontier, to the north-east, geography favoured the British. No serious threat had ever come from the quarter that bordered on Tibet. It therefore had very little by way of defences. Across the border, Tibet remained practically unknown. Lhasa, its capital, had been visited by only two Englishmen, in 1774 and 1811. The Tibetans were supposed to provide trade facilities, but they generally failed to honour the treaties and kept the English at bay. Lhasa remained the most mysterious holy city in the world.

From the early stages of his viceroyalty, Curzon wished to enter into better relations with the Tibetans. There is no evidence that he aspired to control Tibet. His frontier policy was merely cautious; he wished to practise a preventive diplomacy, in order to make sure that Tibet at least remained free of Russian influence. His letters to the Dalai Lama were, however, returned unopened. Attempts to send presents failed – rebuffs that served to raise Curzon's suspicions about Tibet's independence from Russian influence. Over the next few years, these suspicions were to harden and to act as the justification for one of the most abortive military expeditions in imperial history: Captain Francis Younghusband's 1905 mission to Lhasa to safeguard British interests on India's north-east frontier ❧

FUTILE MISSION

Though always listening for a whisper of Russian influence in Afghanistan, the British had never worried about Russians in Tibet. But then, in 1901, disturbing rumours reached India about Russian penetration into the remote, priest-ruled land. As a result, Colonel Francis Younghusband (right) was given command of a mission to Tibet in 1903. Its ostensible purpose was to clear up trade and border disputes: in fact it was meant to counteract Russian influence. This ill-fated expedition, shackled by London's hesitation about advancing and unable to locate either the ruler of Tibet (below) or any Russians, achieved only a treaty that quickly lapsed.

The Dalai Lama, who fled from Tibet to Buddhist Outer Mongolia, allowed his photograph to be taken in Darjeeling in 1910 after six years wandering through Asia,

Stalemate at Khamba Jong

In 1901, strange reports began filtering out of Tibet concerning the friendship between a mysterious Mongol named Agvan Dorjieff, Russian by nationality, with the Dalai Lama, the ruler of Tibet. The Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, was convinced that a demonstration of British power should be staged. Finally, London agreed but, anxious to avoid offending Russia, insisted that the mission led by Sir Francis Younghusband should go only as far as Khamba Jong, just inside Tibet, to negotiate with the Tibetans and their nominal overlords, the Chinese, but only about frontier questions and not about Russians.

On July 19, 1903, Younghusband, three other diplomats and a military escort of 200 Sikhs set off from Darjeeling. At the border, they ignored the Tibetan commander who had come down to stop them. As they rode across into Tibet, he followed after them, muttering darkly that the British had better beware – even toothless dogs can bite.

Younghusband's mission reached Khamba Jong on July 7 and settled down to await the Tibetan and Chinese delegates. They made friends with the local inhabitants, and Younghusband spent long hours with a high-ranking abbot, the Panchen Lama, who took much trouble patiently explaining that the world was flat. No other officials came.

Yaks, whose apt Latin scientific name means "grumbling ox," are loaded up as the British party prepares to cross into Tibetan territory.

The Panchen Lama, the second-highest dignitary in Tibet, frequently visited Younghusband's camp, and was pleased to pose for this portrait.

Tibetans watch in awe and incomprehension as members of Younghusband's Sikh escort demonstrate the deadly Maxim machine-gun.

Massacre of the Willing Victims

In the autumn of 1903, the Tibetans arrested two, very minor spies from the town of Lachung, just across the Indian border in Sikkim. The incident was just what Curzon needed to persuade London that the intransigent Tibetans needed teaching a lesson. London agreed with him and preparations were made for a further advance, using force if necessary. However, the march was sanctioned only as far as Gyantse, and not, as Curzon had wished, to the capital, Lhasa, 100 miles farther on through the mountains.

Younghusband's mission was expanded into a full-scale military force consisting of about 1,200 British and Indian soldiers, four artillery pieces and two Maxim guns, 16,000 pack animals and 10,000 coolies. By early December, it was poised at the Jelap La Pass, the 14,000-foot entrance into Tibet, the "roof of the world." To the hazards of travel over some of the roughest and highest terrain in the world, was added subzero winter cold.

Conditions were frightful. The soldiers wrote home in pencil, since their ink froze. Rifle-bolts froze into the breeches, and subalterns kept the Maxims bolts warm in their own beds. The troops' clothing, though lavish by the standards of those days, offered no real protection and was, in addition, too bulky to allow free movement for firing. Yet, although scouts kept reporting that they had sighted large Tibetan forces in the hills, Younghusband was not attacked. It was not until the two opposing forces reached the tiny village of Guru on March 31, 1904 that they came into direct conflict.

As the pack-horses slithered into Tibet down the icy slop of the Jelap La Pass, the scene reminded one soldier mor of the retreat from Moscow than a British army's advanc

A British officer quizzes an elderly and voluble native about the country ahead.

"Why," wrote Younghusband to his superiors, "should we be put off by the cold?" His troops, struggling through blizzards, could have given him an answer to that.

Though the troops were issued with coats and cloaks, fur-lined boots and thick underwear, some still died from pneumonia and frostbite.

On the Roof of the World

Some kind of engagement at Guru was inevitable. Two thousand Tibetan troops were waiting there, blocking the caravan trail, which the British had to follow if they were to get to Gyantse.

On March 31, 1904, the British reached the Tibetan fortifications. The Tibetan general galloped up and told them to withdraw. Younghusband replied by giving them 15 minutes to clear the way. A quarter of an hour passed, and nothing happened. Then, slowly, the troops advanced until they were covering the Tibetans at point-blank range. Officers were taking photographs and the *Daily Mail* correspondent was already scribbling a dispatch describing a bloodless victory when Younghusband ordered the Sikhs to disarm the Tibetans.

As the two forces wrestled with each other, the situation began to turn ugly. Then the Tibetan general fired a shot. Fighting broke out instantly. Volley after volley of British bullets crashed into the solid mass of Tibetans. The Maxims chattered vindictively. A young officer wrote home that night: "I got so sick of the slaughter that I ceased to fire."

Worse still, the Tibetans did not flee. They walked slowly away, heads bowed, ignoring the bullets that continued to mow them down until nearly 900 were lying dead and wounded on the field. The British had six minor casualties.

As the two armies face each other on either side of the Tibetan defence wall, Sikh troops attempt to disarm their opponents.

A wounded Tibetan soldier, bewildered by the ferocity of the British troops who have wounded him, painfully tries to rise to his feet.

After the British guns opened up, in a matter of minutes half the Tibetan army, armed only with matchlocks and swords, fell dead or wounded on the Guru battlefield.

In a photograph taken by a British officer, Tibetan dead strew the ground as the British army sadly resumes the march to Gyantse, and ultimately Lhasa.

Dead End at the Forbidden City

After the massacre at Guru, the British continued to Gyantse. There they waited, as at Khamba Jong, for nonexistent delegates. Finally the Tibetans attacked fiercely. Younghusband managed to beat them off, and then he had a good pretext to continue to Lhasa, known as the "forbidden city" since so few Europeans had passed its walls. Grudgingly, the home government agreed to his proposals.

The expedition marched on, until it reached the plains before the city of Lhasa. Here Younghusband learned that the Dalai Lama had fled to Outer Mongolia.

When the British entered the city on August 2, they were in turn awed by the magnificence of the great golden citadel, the Potola, and disgusted by Lhasa's squalor.

Negotiations dragged on while the soldiers organized gymkhanas and football matches at their camp to pass the time. An agreement was signed at last in the Potola on September 7, but it was a hollow victory for Younghusband. He had gone looking for Russians and had found none. And the agreement giving the British great trading concessions was quickly repudiated by a nervous home government, sensitive about Russian reactions.

Tibetan prisoners march eagerly into the British camp. Most were peasants, pressed to fight in the first place, and pleased with the free British rations.

Inhabitants of Lhasa, described by one officer as "very low, underbred, idiotic-looking people," stare warily at the foreign cameraman.

The imposing and beautiful Potola Castle, home of the Dalai Lama at Lhasa, has white walls, a golden roof, and is taller than St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

II. Last Throw of the Dice

In 1901 and more strongly in 1902, Curzon heard rumours that seemed to justify his fears about Russian intervention on the north-east frontier of India with Tibet. The Russian government was supposedly sending agents and arms to the mysterious country up in the mountains.

There was nothing, apparently, to be done about this. Tibet lay nominally under the suzerainty of China, a power then so decrepit that it was unable to enforce its rights. When the British protested to China, they were apt to be told that the Tibetans were out of control. On the other hand, attempts to get into direct touch with Tibet were met with the reply that all dealings should be conducted through the government of China.

At the end of 1902 the Viceroy tried to bring the issue to a conclusion. There was, exceptionally, an adult Dalai Lama, the ruler of Tibet, with whom business might be done. (Dalai Lamas were chosen by divination as children and then placed under a Regent until the age of 18. The Regent, eager to protect his own authority, had a vested interest in the Dalai Lama's early demise, and many "died" before they could take power.)

Curzon desired to send a British mission accompanied by an armed escort into Tibet to negotiate with the Dalai Lama, and to secure the appointment of a British agent to reside at Lhasa, the capital. He urged upon his unconvinced colleagues at home that if this policy were carried out firmly and decisively there would be no military risk. As Curzon pointed out, since Russia lay at a great distance from Tibet this was one region in which the British held the advantage.

The Cabinet had no desire to move. "I have a sort of consciousness," Curzon wrote, "that my arguments do not produce the smallest effect. If a government means to sit down . . . no amount of kicking, even on the most sensitive spot, will induce it to rise; and I contemplate now, as I have always contemplated and wrote in my book about Russia thirteen years ago, that we shall steadily throw away all our trump cards."

Whispers of a British intention to move into Tibet began to circulate in Europe. Russia protested; and members of the Cabinet, especially the Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, were reluctant to do anything that would estrange Britain further from Russia. London was again seeking a settlement of central Asian questions with Russia. For the moment Lord Lansdowne, the Foreign Secretary, confined himself to telling the Russian Ambassador that if Russia did send a mission to Tibet, Britain would send a stronger one. Any display of Russian activity there would be met by a more than equivalent British display.

The Secretary of State for India told Curzon that, even in these exceptionally favourable circumstances, the Cabinet could not move unless some gross insult were offered to the British honour or flag. This cautious approach was, he believed, Britain's best future policy in Asia. The practical result, Curzon replied, would be "that you will be unable to take a step upon your frontiers until they have actually been crossed by the enemy."

The most that the Cabinet would do was authorize talks with Chinese and Tibetan representatives, for the purpose of discussing certain minor border incidents involving herdsmen and their yaks. The two sides were to meet just on the Tibetan side of the border. Curzon appointed Francis Younghusband, explorer, mystic, newspaper correspondent, student of religions, to lead the mission.

Younghusband crossed into Tibet early in July, 1903. The early stages of his assignment were farcical. The Tibetans asked Younghusband to leave. He refused. They rejected any contact with the mission and said they would not negotiate. The Chinese representative had no powers and contented himself with apologizing to Younghusband for the obtuseness of the Tibetans. Younghusband remained calm. He was happy just to be there. He loved the solitary places and the magnificence of the mountain scenery, the clear light and the intense colour.

In the autumn the Cabinet reluctantly sanctioned a further advance, on the condition that it should not lead to any occupation of Tibet or permanent intervention in Tibetan affairs. There was already a clear difference of purpose between the government of India and the government in London: the former wished to obtain a new treaty and the means to ensure its observance, the latter wished to obtain reparation for the border incidents and retreat without loss of face.

"Pray believe," Curzon asked the Secretary of State, "that I am not in the least anxious to effect any *coup de théâtre* in Tibet: I neither want frontier fighting, nor am I concerned about the extension of the frontiers of Empire. But what I want to secure is that our present intolerable and humiliating relations with the Tibetans shall not continue and that they shall be sufficiently impressed with our power to realise that they cannot look to any other quarter for protection."

The mission moved forward very slowly in bitter weather. On the first night of the advance, 50 degrees of frost were registered. Younghusband took the risk of riding, with only two companions and unarmed, to talk with the Tibetans; but with no result. In March, 1904, the first major battle took place, at Guru. A small Tibetan army, of perhaps 2,000 men, stood athwart the road towards Lhasa. Younghusband refused to open fire but told the Tibetan general that his force would be disarmed. A skirmish broke out, and shooting began. The Tibetans had no chance, and nearly half of them were killed or taken prisoner. The rest, their

The Gyantse medal commemorates Sir Francis Younghusband's mission to Tibet.

cause visibly lost, simply walked off.

After another encounter, when the Tibetans were again routed, the mission reached Gyantse, halfway to Lhasa. Early in May, it beat off with some difficulty a serious Tibetan attack on the camp. The Chinese negotiator had still not appeared; and at last the Cabinet became convinced that an advance to the capital itself would probably be necessary. With the mission under attack day and night, the Cabinet eventually sanctioned the move forward to Lhasa.

The position was from the start an impossible one. The commander of the military escort wanted to get out of Tibet at the earliest possible moment, and certainly before the snow sealed off the passes across the Himalayas. Communications were primitive; indeed any telegram needing a decision in London meant a delay of a fortnight.

As it happened, the last stages of the advance took place without serious resistance and through smiling country. One day in early August the mission entered a pleasant valley of trees and cornfields. On a small hill they saw, iridescent in the sunlight, the golden roofs and pinnacles of the Potala Palace, home and sanctuary of the Dalai Lama. Younghusband, followed by Chinese and British soldiers, marched through the heart of Lhasa, the first Englishmen to do so since the time of Warren Hastings. The Tibetans looked on with apparent apathy. They showed no signs of bitter hostility to the mission and indeed, in Younghusband's words, did not seem "to care a tuppenny damn whether we went there or not."

The Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia, also a Buddhist country. Younghusband therefore had to negotiate with priests of the Buddhist hierarchy. The terms of the treaty that he eventually signed were very different from – and politically more dangerous than – those the home government had authorized. This was quite understandable: he had established good relations with the Tibetans and had no need to indulge in the razing of buildings, the seizure of hostages and other primitive courses for which the Cabinet in London had been prepared. And he was under urgent pressure to get out before winter set in, which allowed little time to communicate with London and the renegotiation this would have entailed.

The convention kept foreign agents out of Tibet and was the first occasion when Britain and Tibet had established direct relations. The Tibetans were to make a reality of previous agreements signed in 1890 and 1894 but not observed, to allow trade marts. They were to pay reparation for the border incidents over 75 years (instead of the three years that the Cabinet in London had thought suitable) and the British were to occupy a tongue of border territory called the Chumbi Valley as a security.

The Russians naturally complained. The home government insisted that some of these terms be altered at once, not least because they believed that it was supremely important to behave well towards the Russians. Although the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 was raging at that moment, Russia was still extending her railways right up to the frontiers with Afghanistan and rumoured to be moving troops in central Asia. The British government was in a distinctly shaky position and anyway nearing the end of its term of office.

There could be no clearer illustration than this episode of the differences between the home and Indian governments. In India, policy was inspired by fear of Russian intrigue, amply justified in view of earlier performances in central Asia; whereas the Cabinet in London was judging on wider considerations and wanted an end to the sterile quarrelling with Russia in central Asia and elsewhere.

On the local issue, there was good reason for Younghusband's mission, which was on the whole conducted with distinction and determination in desperate circumstances. In the event, the modest advantages which it conferred were whittled down, first by the Cabinet's insistence on rejecting parts of the convention and later by the terms of an agreement made with Russia in 1907.

The Younghusband mission is also a prime example of the way in which a mere hint of Russian action could lead the British into international embarrassments. There is no evidence that Russia ever made any serious attempt to control Tibet; she had no claim, and little opportunity, to intervene there; but the British were prepared to pay a considerable price to keep her out.

The Younghusband expedition was the last throw of the dice in the Great Game.

One of the many patriotic postcards of which the Victorians were so fond shows the Royal Fusiliers marching into Lhasa. The Potola is on the heights.

Russia was too much endangered elsewhere to mount a real challenge after 1905. When, at the turn of the century, Russia had sought to dominate Manchuria and Korea, she was soon at odds with Japan. In the ensuing war of 1904–05, Japan inflicted upon Russia a defeat that sent two of her fleets to the bottom of the sea, cost her heavy losses on land, stimulated internal discontent to the point of revolt, and weakened her whole standing in international affairs.

At last the Tsar and his ministers had compelling reasons to make terms with the British in central Asia. Important as Russia's interests were, both there and in the Far East, her interests in Europe and the Near East still counted for more. The Finance Minister told his colleagues in the autumn of 1906 that Russia must cut her coat more closely according to her cloth. He referred to the mistake of not measuring up the "resources at our disposal against our intended objective."

Britain equally had good reason for agreement. The new Liberal government felt no more able than its Conservative predecessor to promise India reinforcements on the scale that the military authorities thought necessary to meet a Russian advance. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, badly wanted to bring Russia back into European affairs as a counterweight to Germany. This was the background to the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907, which arrived at a division of interests in Persia, recognized that Russia would not interfere in Afghanistan and effectively threw away the remaining fruits of Sir Francis Younghusband's mission to Tibet.

In the following years the Russians capitalized on Britain's evident anxiety to keep their goodwill in Europe by behaving much as they pleased in Persia. On one occasion, the commander of the Cossacks at Teheran threatened to bombard the British Legation. Indeed, by 1914 Russia had virtually annexed the northern part of Persia, in which most of the principal cities lay. There was nothing the British could do, short of renewing the Great Game. As one British Minister at Teheran put it: "You can't keep an elephant out of your potato plot by tying a parchment to his trunk."

The reluctance of the British government to return to the uncertainties and expense of a renewed contest for influence in central Asia, the Russians' obvious need of time for retrenchment and reform and the preoccupation of both powers with the armed strength and uncertain temper of Germany, had put an end to the Great Game in its old form.

In July, 1914, on the eve of the First World War, the British Ambassador in St. Petersburg urged support for Russia: "If we fail her now, we cannot hope to maintain that friendly co-operation with her in Asia that is of such vital importance to us." This argument certainly counted for something in London. Britain and Russia fought together in the war – a state of affairs that would have seemed incredible a few years before – because each saw Germany as an immediate menace. The Great Game was over for good.

British regimental badges decorate a hillside at Cherat on the North-West Frontier, a testimony to many bitter clashes with warlike tribes.

Public promenade dress and ball dress, 1830